

T H E
L O U N G E R.

[N^o XCI.]

Saturday, October 28. 1786.

IT is the observation of an elegant author *, "That there is a sublime and tender melancholy, almost the universal attendant of genius, which is too apt to degenerate into gloom and disgust with the world." I have frequently had occasion to mark the justice of this observation; and it is with much regret that I have sometimes seen men of taste, and delicacy of feeling, have a tendency to indulge in habits of gloom, despondency, and disrelish of the world. There is a certain standard of virtue and propriety, which a man of delicacy is apt to form in his own mind, but which, in the common events of the world, is rarely to be met with;—there are certain ideas of elevated and sublime happiness which a man of a highly cultivated mind has a disposition to indulge, which it is hardly possible can be realized. When, therefore, a person of this disposition comes abroad into the world, when he meets with folly where he expected wisdom, falsehood in the room of honour, coarseness instead of delicacy, and selfishness and insensibility where he had formed high ideas of generosity and refinement, he is apt to fall under the dominion of melancholy, and to see the world in a gloomy point of view. Such a man, if he is not at pains to guard against it, runs some risk of contracting a degree of habitual disgust at mankind, and becoming misanthropical to a certain extent.

It will not, however, be that species of misanthropy which takes delight in the miseries of mankind; on the contrary, it will be a feeling of disgust arising from disappointed benevolence, mingled with pity and compassion for the follies and weaknesses of men. I doubt much if there exists in the world a complete *misanthrope*, in the darkest sense of that word, a person who takes pleasure in the wretchedness of others. If there does, it is impossible to conceive sufficient detestation at such a character. But the misanthropy of which I speak, is of a much softer kind, and borders nearly on the highest degree of *philanthropy*. It seems indeed to be the child of philanthropy, and to proceed from too much sensibility, hurt by disappointment in the benevolent and amiable feelings.

It is a common and a just remark, that where a strong friendship has subsisted, if that friendship is once broken by the fault of either party, it is difficult to prevent a certain degree of hatred and disgust from taking place. The more susceptible the two persons were of the strong attachments of friendship, the more warmly and the more closely they were once united, so much the more difficult does it become to bring about a re-union or reconciliation. The sanguine and romantic opinions they had formed of one another's worth, and the disappointment which both or either of them feel from the behaviour of the other, inflicts a wound which rankles in the soul, and prevents all future confidence. The same conduct in another person not so dear, with whom there was not so close an union, would have been passed over, and made little impression; the former distant and cold acquaintance would have gone on as usual, and forgiveness would easily have taken place.

Somewhat similar to the situation of a person who has been disappointed in the conduct of one from whom he expected much happiness and much friend-

* Dr Gregory.

ship, is that of him who, having conceived warm and elevated notions of the world, has been disappointed in all these better expectations. The world, with its pursuits, will appear in an unfavourable light; he will be apt to quit its society, and to indulge in solitude his gloomy reflections. His dislike of the world, however, will be of a calm and gentle kind; it will rather be pity than hatred; though he may think ill of the species, he will be kind to individuals; he may dislike man, but will assist John or James.

Shakespeare, from whose writings much knowledge of the human heart is to be acquired, has presented us, in several of his characters, with a history of that melancholy and misanthropy I have described above.

Of the character of Hamlet, one of my predecessors* has given a delineation which appears to me to be a just one. Naturally of the most amiable and virtuous disposition, and endued with the most exquisite sensibility, he is unfortunate; and his misfortunes proceed from the crimes of those with whom he was the most nearly connected, for whom he had the strongest feelings of natural affection. From these circumstances, he is hurt in his soul's tenderest part; he is unhinged in his principles of action, falls into melancholy, and conceives disgust at the world: yet amidst all his disgust, and the misanthropy which he at times discovers, we constantly perceive, that goodness and benevolence are the prevailing features of his character; amidst all the gloom of his melancholy, and the agitation in which his calamities involve him, there are occasional outbreaks of a mind richly endowed by nature, and cultivated by education. Had Hamlet possessed less sensibility, had he not been so easily hurt by the calamities of life, by the crimes of the persons with whom he was connected, he would have preserved more equanimity, he would not have been the prey of dark desponding melancholy; the world and all its uses would not have appeared to him "stale, flat, and unprofitable; an unweeded garden that grows to seed, possessed merely by "things rank and gross in nature."

In the play of "*As you like it*," there is brought upon the stage a personage of a more fixed and systematic melancholy than that of Hamlet. Hamlet's melancholy and disgust with the world, is occasioned by the particular nature of the misfortunes he meets with. But in *Jaques* we see a settled and confirmed melancholy, not proceeding from any misfortune peculiar to himself, but arising from a general feeling of the vanity of the world, and the folly of those engaged in its pursuits. His melancholy is therefore more settled than that of Hamlet, and is in truth more deeply rooted. He takes no share in the enjoyments of life, but abandons society, and lives in solitude. Hamlet, wounded to the heart by the misfortunes which befall him, and irritated by the crimes of others, feels more poignantly at the time. The feelings of Jaques are more general, and therefore the more calm, but from that very cause are deeper and more fixed. It is to be observed, however, that the melancholy and misanthropy of Jaques, like that of Hamlet, proceeds from excess of tenderness, from too much sensibility to the evils of the world and the faults of mankind. His moralizing on the poor sequestered stag, is a most beautiful illustration of his tenderness, and of his nice perception and sorrow for the follies and vices of men;—as his comparison of the world to a stage affords a highly-finished picture of the estimation in which he holds human life.

In "*Timon of Athens*," we are presented with a character in many respects different from that of Hamlet or Jaques. Here we have misanthropy of a much darker hue. Soured with disappointment; fallen from the height of prosperity into the lowest state of adversity; deceived by flattering friends; forsaken by the buzzing attendants on wealth and greatness, Timon conceives

* Mirror, No. 99. 100.

disgust at the world and its enjoyments, and that disgust produces hatred and aversion at mankind. Yet even here it is observable, that with all Timon's misanthropy, there is a great mixture of original goodness and benevolence. At his first outset in life he was unsuspicious, and wished to contribute to the happiness of all around him. "Being free himself, he thought all others so." Disappointed in the opinion he had formed of the world, and shocked with the ingratitude he met with; "brought low," as he is said to be, "by his own heart, undone by goodness," he becomes a prey to deep gloom and misanthropy; but with all his misanthropy, he preserves a sense of honour and of right.

It is to be admitted, however, that as Timon's is a character much inferior to, and much less amiable than that of Hamlet or of Jaques, so his misanthropy is of a much blacker and more savage nature. Hamlet's misanthropy arises from a deep sense of the guilt of others;—Jaques's from a general impression of the follies and weaknesses of the world;—Timon's is produced by a selfish sense of the ingratitude of others to himself. His disgust at the world, therefore, is not mixed with the same gentleness and amiable tenderness which is displayed by the other two; and he possesses as much misanthropy of the blackest sort as it is possible for human nature to arrive at. Shakespeare indeed holds him forth as a person altogether bereft of reason. He seems to have thought, that such a degree of misanthropy as Timon is described to be possessed of, was inconsistent with the use of that faculty.

In the criticism on Hamlet which I before quoted, it is observed, that amidst all his melancholy and gloom, there is a great deal of gaiety and playfulness in his deportment. The remark is certainly just, and it may be extended to the other characters of Shakespeare above taken notice of. Notwithstanding the settled dejection of Jaques, he is described as possessing an uncommon degree of humour. He himself tells us, "he is often wrapped in a most humorous sadness." The account which he gives of the motley fool he met with in the forest, and the description of the seven ages of human life, are lively instances of this strong feature in his character.

Even Timon, black as his melancholy appears, is not without an humour in his sadness. The joke put by him on his worthless friends, in inviting them to dinner when he had none to give them, the conversation between him and Apemantus, and the last scene with the Poet and Painter, are sufficient confirmations of this remark.

The disposition in all these characters to a certain degree of jocular and sportiveness, is far from being unnatural. On the contrary, I am disposed to think that something of this kind takes place in every person who is under the influence of melancholy. There is no doubt that the mind may be so much overwhelmed, as to be incapable of relishing any degree of sportiveness or of gaiety; but when the first paroxysms of grief are over, when the violent effects of overwhelming distress, which cannot long continue, have subsided, and when the mind has assumed a tone perhaps equally distressing, but more lasting and calm, and even more thoughtful, there is no time when the effect of a joke will be more easily perceived, or better understood.

This may perhaps be accounted for, by a few observations on the state of the mind in such circumstances, with which I shall conclude the present Paper.

A person under the influence of melancholy, or, indeed, of any passion whatever, must frequently become a spectator of his own mind*; must often be led to view his own feelings in the light in which they will appear to others. Viewing them in this light, and in the situation of persons not under the same prejudice, they may appear to him very differently from what is his

* See Theory of Moral Sentiment.

own habitual impression; and in this situation he may entertain somewhat of a disposition to smile at himself, and to admit of a joke even at his own expence. The gentleness of Hamlet's spirit made him anxious to accommodate himself, and bring down his own feelings to a level with those of the persons around him; and therefore, on all occasions, even in the deepest melancholy, he engages in pleasantry of conversation; he even ventures to joke with Horatio on his mother's marriage, which was the great cause of all his sorrow.

If, as some philosophers have maintained, ridicule arises from contrast, there is no situation, provided we are capable of perceiving ridicule at all, in which the ridiculous will appear in a stronger point of view, than when the mind is under the dominion of melancholy. The very situation must heighten the contrast. The circumstance of *Cromwell* and his associate bedaubing one another's faces with ink, while they were in the act of signing the warrant for the death of the King; or that of Lord *Loval* with the lads on his beard kissing *Hogarth*, who had come to steal a drawing of him the day before his execution; would have been childish at any other time.

When a person is in a melancholy frame of mind, such a melancholy as leads him to view the world and all its pursuits in a gloomy point of view, this is apt to produce a sort of elevation above the world, and an indifference about every thing that is going on in it. The great and the low, the rich and the poor, the busy and the idle, are all seen with equal unconcern, as passing through a few years to that period, when all their projects will be buried in the grave.

*Divesne, prisco natus ab Inacho,
Nil interest, an pauper, et infima
De gente, sub dio moreris,
Victima nil miserantis Orci.
Omnes eodem cogimur.—*

Such a person may feel some gratification in letting himself down from the melancholy eminence from which he views human life; and considering all its occupations as frivolous alike, it will rather flatter than hurt his pride, to join in the trifling jest or idle merriment.

He who is under the pressure of grief, under the influence of sorrow, occasioned by some calamity, may at times feel a sort of gratification in escaping from his own mind, and from the dominion of his melancholy. To use the words of an author who has a peculiar talent at expressing the nice feelings of the human heart: "There is a certain kind of trifling, in which a mind not much at ease, can sometimes indulge itself. One feels an escape, as it were, from the heart, and is fain to take up with lighter company. It is like the theft of a truant boy, who goes to play for a few minutes, while his master is asleep, and throws the chiding for his task upon futurity."

Such a disposition of mind, however, with all that interest which it exerts in us, with all the privileges it may claim, and all the pleasantry it may at times enjoy, is nevertheless deeply to be regretted in others, and anxiously to be avoided in ourselves. I must the more earnestly warn my readers against the indulgence of this sort of melancholy disposition; because, in its first stages, there is something gratifying, something which flatters and captivates: But if allowed to grow into a habit, it unhinges every better faculty of the mind; it destroys the usefulness, and blasts the enjoyment of life.

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